Offers Theory Of Accidental Kennedy Death

BALTIMORE (AP) — A Maryland gunsmith who has spent years studying the assassination of President John F. Kennedy believes that a Secret Service agent accidentally fired the fatal bullet, panicking after hearing Lee Harvey Oswald's first shot.

"Since 1969 I have been unable to turn up evidence which shakes any part of my conclusion," gunsmith Howard Donahue said in an interview with the Baltimore Sunday Sun.

The Secret Service would not comment.

The Warren Commission concluded that Kennedy was killed by Oswald acting alone.

Donahue first became involved with the assassination in a 1967 CBS television show in which he and other marksmen fired the type of rifle that Oswald is thought to have used under almost the same conditions.

Donahue was the only one to score three accurate shots during a 6.5 second period, the time that Oswald is thought to have had to fire.

He accepts the evidence that Oswald was trying to kill the President in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963. But he says that Oswald's first bullet missed the presidential auto, hitting the pavement and breaking up in a spray of metal fragments.

"It is a matter of record that five metal fragments were picked up later in the car," he said. "There is pictoral evidence of their hitting the windshield and also denting a piece of chromework near the rearview mirror."

He theorizes that one of the fragments was the 6.5-mm. piece of metal found between Kennedy's skull and skin.

"It would sting — as a shot from a BB gun would sting — and after having been hit, the President could have made the exclamation that Roy Kellerman said that he made, 'My God, I'm hit.'" Donahue said.

Kellerman, a Secret Service agent, was riding in the front seat of the presidential limousine.

"Oswald's second shot was the so-called miracle bullet which pierced the President's back and throat and passed through (former Texas) Gov. (John) Connally," Donahue said. "Unlikely as it may seem, the high-velocity bullet would be easily capable of doing exactly what the Warren Report accepted as actuality."

He said that the President could not have spoken after being hit by the high-velocity bullet, which shattered his larynx.

"Gov. Connally recovered from his wounds and I think the President could have, too, although possibly his voice might have been impaired," the gunsmith said.

To explain the fatal shot, which blew Kennedy's skull apart, Donahue cites the testimony of S.M. Holland, an elderly man who saw the assassination from an overpass. Holland said that he saw a Secret Service man with a machine gun stand up in the presidential car and stumble.

Donahue said that he thought that the man who stood was in the follow-up car. The gunsmith said that most observers probably didn't see him because he was shielded by other agents in the follow-up car.

"Did Oswald get off a third shot? If he did, it could have gone wild, and the shot of it could have blended with the shot fired accidentally by a Secret Service man in the follow-up car."

William Manchester's book "The Death of a President" refers to an AR-15 .223 automatic rifle lying on the back seat of the follow-up car. The Manchester book refers to an agent who "raises the barrel of the AR-15 and points it around aimlessly."

Donahue believes the automatic weapon was actually an M-16, which looks like an AR-15.

Donahue contends that the two bullets that struck the President weren't identical bullets fired from the same high-powered Italian rifle, as accepted by the Warren Commission.

Another factor in Donahue's theory is former Senator Ralph Yarborough's eyewitness account.

"I smelled the gunpowder ... It clung to the car nearly all of the way to the hospital," Yarborough said. The President's car was 90 yards from the book depository where Oswald hid — too far from the odor of a firing rifle.

Donahue said that there was evidence that was crucial to his theory: Federal Bureau of Investigation spectrographic tests of bullet fragments from Kennedy's head. The tests could show whether one or more than one type of bullet hit the President.

The tests have been hidden away in a secret site, Donahue said. "I think the American people have a right to know whatever story the tapes have to tell," he said.